

# "SISTERHOOD" NURSES.

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## A LETTER

ADDRESSED TO THE

GOVERNORS OF ST. GEORGE'S HOSPITAL,

BY THE

REV. WILLIAM NIVEN, B.D.

*Incumbent of St. Saviour's, Chelsea,*

AND FORMERLY

*Chaplain to St. George's Hospital.*

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"Prove all things: hold fast that which is good."—1 THESS. v. 21.

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1866.



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TO THE  
GOVERNORS OF ST. GEORGE'S HOSPITAL.

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MY LORDS AND GENTLEMEN,

It was formerly my privilege to be Chaplain to your Hospital, and although the long period of twenty-seven years has intervened since I resigned that office, I have not forgotten the kindness which I received from you, nor the estimate which I then formed of the value of your noble Charity, and of the benefits which it is conferring upon the labouring classes of this country.

In a merely philanthropic point of view the importance of our hospitals is generally admitted, and the advantages which they afford for the study of medical science, are not less widely acknowledged; but it may be questioned if even their generous supporters are fully aware of the favourable opportunities which such institutions present for the religious and moral improvement of their inmates.

This made a deep impression on my mind during my connection with your Hospital. I found there many persons who are unapproachable in their own homes, but who were brought to the Hospital by sickness or casualty. To many such it was the first little resting time in their lives, and proved a valuable season for reflection, and for receiving the first principles of religious instruction, whilst the attention

paid to their bodily wants was highly calculated to increase and strengthen these impressions.

I feel also that the provision made by you for conducting the worship of Almighty God, and for securing the religious comfort and instruction of the patients, is all that can be desired, and is at once liberal and considerate. You provide a Chaplain, in full orders, of the Established Church, whose duties are clearly and well defined, and, at the same time, you allow Roman Catholics and Protestant Dissenters to be visited by ministers of their own communion when they desire it. Nothing can be more reasonable or suitable than this arrangement, and I can testify that its practical operation has, in times past, proved all that can be desired. It has produced amongst persons of various shades of opinion, feelings of mutual respect, kindness, and good-will.

The religious aspects of our own times are, however, remarkable. There is a strange unsettling of men's minds on many points, and the dangers which threaten our National Church are great and formidable. Amongst these there has appeared a disposition to find fault with, and, if possible, to overthrow that system which has so long worked well in our hospitals, workhouses, and similar institutions.

It is, therefore, with extreme regret that I have heard of a proposal, which, if carried into effect, will introduce a new system into St. George's Hospital, which can scarcely fail to produce much strife and contention, and to alienate many old and liberal friends.

The circumstances are these:—A few weeks ago, a Committee was appointed for the purpose of considering if any means can be devised to improve the Nursing Department of the Hospital. The subject is very important,

and the consideration of it was entrusted to gentlemen of much experience, and all of them tried friends of the Hospital.

It appears that in some other Institutions in London, the nursing department has been entrusted to certain "Sisterhoods," which have lately sprung up in this country, and that the Committee think that this mode of conducting the nursing of the Hospital is worthy of consideration. The expense connected with an arrangement of this kind is considerable, the objections which may be urged against it are numerous, and the Committee do not advise its *full* adoption *at present*.

They recommend, however, that two wards shall at once be placed under the care and control of the "Sisters" belonging to an establishment called St. Peter's Home, in Brompton Square, which is said to be munificently assisted by a Member of the Committee. It is of course implied, that if the results of this experiment shall be deemed satisfactory, the system thus introduced will be extended to the other wards of the Hospital.

I have no doubt whatever, that the members of the Committee are sincerely desirous of improving the nursing department, but I feel convinced that they have overlooked the fact, that they are introducing a new religious element into the establishment, which is calculated to disturb that good understanding which has so long prevailed, and to create much strife and division amongst us.

These gentlemen may probably say that they aim at nothing more than the improvement of the nursing, and that they do not contemplate the introduction of any new religious element into the Hospital. True; but to whom are

they about to commit the nursing? To a secular society? Certainly not; but to a religious community—to persons belonging to a religious order or Sisterhood, and who are bound together by certain solemn engagements. Is it possible to introduce such persons without seriously affecting the religious tone and teaching of the institution?

It is also worthy of notice that the Committee recommend these wards to be so entirely entrusted to the management of the “Sisters,” that even the Matron of the Hospital shall not be permitted to interfere! A door is thus opened at once for secret and mysterious proceedings of all kinds.

The question is of a very serious nature, and having paid some attention to the general subject, I venture to offer you, my Lords and Gentlemen, a few observations on the origin and nature of these Sisterhoods—on the fruits which they have already produced—and on the perilous nature of the present proposal.

My earnest desire and prayer is, that you may be led to such a decision, as will tend to secure the future prosperity of your old and invaluable Charity.

I. What is the nature of these Sisterhoods? With whom have they originated? And what do they profess to be?

It will not surely be denied that such institutions have been totally unknown in the Church of England for the last three hundred years. It will also be conceded that they have not originated with the authorized rulers of our Church, but with that party within her pale, who are now causing so much anxiety and trouble to the Episcopal Bench, and who are openly setting their authority at defiance; persons who were well described on a late occasion by our venerable

Primate when he said, that, "however unintentionally, they were the worst enemies of the Church of England."

With these persons the "Sisterhoods" have originated, and if we proceed to ask what they profess to be, we are told that they are the revival of the order of Deaconesses which existed in certain of the early Christian Churches. Can any one who is acquainted with Church history affirm this to be the case?

There was indeed an order of Deaconesses in the early Christian Churches, but the following qualifications were required of those who asked admission to the order. 1st. They were to be widows. 2nd. They were to be widows who had borne children. 3rd. They were to have been only once married. And 4th. By the most ancient canons, they were to be at least sixty years of age.\* Do rules so wise and good characterize the modern "Sisterhoods?" On the contrary, we find them filled with females of tender age, many of whom are there in direct opposition to the wishes of their parents. A clergyman of great respectability, and of much experience, lately stated at a public meeting that he had met with two of these Lady-Sisters. The one, the daughter, I believe, of a nobleman, whom he describes as a most pleasing and attractive person, was living by herself in a little court, where every house almost was the haunt of vice, and where she had been placed by her Lady-Superior! The other, who was not more than twenty years of age, was the daughter of a clergyman, and described as a very pretty girl. She too was placed in circumstances scarcely less perilous.

Will such arrangements bear comparison with the Female

\* See Bingham's "Antiquities of the Christian Church," Vol. I. p. 233.



Diaconate of the early Churches? Are they consistent with decency and common sense? Will English gentlemen, such as the Governors of St. George's Hospital, lend their patronage to proceedings so unwise and obviously so perilous?

But, we are told that Sisterhoods have been found useful in Roman Catholic countries, and why, it is asked, may they not be made so in Protestant England?

To this it has been wisely replied that "all Roman Catholic countries are under an unmarried priesthood. Their clergy have no wives to relieve the wants of the poor, or minister to the necessities of the sick. They have no daughters to look after the little children, to teach them, or to lead them to their parish churches . . . . There is neither clergyman's wife nor clergyman's daughter to give kind and womanly advice, to minister to their wants or to do anything for them, as women only can do for women. Nothing can be conceived more dreary, desolate, and destitute, than these endless successions of parishes (in Roman Catholic countries) without lady or gentlewoman to look after them."

We can easily understand how in circumstances such as these, Sisterhoods may be found highly beneficial. They form the only way of supplying a want—the want of a married clergy, coupled as that is in most Roman Catholic countries, with the want of a resident gentry.

"The Sisterhoods on the Continent" (says the writer already referred to) "are a poor makeshift for the benevolent families of a married clergy—a mere makeshift for the charitable families of a resident gentry;" and after narrating his own experience, both at home and abroad, he adds, "In our



parishes in England we do an hundredfold more work, both spiritual and temporal, and the work done, is an hundredfold better done. There can be no comparison between the work done, either in quality or quantity. And although there are persons in this country who will, no doubt conscientiously, contradict this, simply because they have not been themselves, as religious and benevolent men, habitually mixed up with the religious and benevolent work going on noiselessly and silently in this country—although there are persons, in simple and pure ignorance of what is going on among us, who will contradict this statement, I desire, as one who has seen the work both abroad and at home, to reiterate it in the strongest language I can command . . . . But let there be no self-complacency or self-righteousness among us in this, for it arises in a large measure from our having means and agencies in this country, that are impossible—absolutely impossible—on the Continent. We have our Sisterhoods of a different complexion and different character altogether; Sisterhoods the holiest and the noblest that ever graced humanity in our fallen world; true Sisterhoods of Christ's Church, doing the holy work of Christ's Church, and owned and recognised by Him who is the Great Shepherd and Bishop of the Church.”\*

The same writer records his experience of the Protestant Sisterhoods of Germany, and shows that the system there adopted is wholly unsuited to the circumstances and position of this country.

I venture therefore to maintain that little or no similarity

\* See an Address on “Protestant Sisterhoods,” lately published by the Rev. M. Hobart Seymour, M.A., in which the whole question is very ably and temperately discussed. London: Seeleys, 54, Fleet Street.

exists between these modern Sisterhoods and the female Diaconate of the early Churches, and I desire to express my conviction that whoever will study this subject, with an unprejudiced mind, will arrive at the conclusion, that however valuable certain of these societies may be, in the less favoured kingdoms of the Continent, they are wholly out of place amidst the high privileges which Divine Providence has bestowed on our beloved Protestant England.

II. It is, however, matter of fact, that Anglican Sisterhoods have been established. We may regard it as a retrograde movement, and regret it as indicative of an unhealthy tone in the religious feeling of our countrymen ; but the fact itself is unquestionable. Under these circumstances, it seems fair to inquire what the results have been, and how far the system has worked satisfactorily in the judgment of its friends and supporters. The period that has elapsed since such religious communities were formed is comparatively short—certainly not much more than twenty years—and with the eye of Protestant England upon them, it will be admitted that the motives to moderation and propriety have been unusually strong. It seems, then, reasonable to expect that the results (as stated by friends) would, to the present time, be of a very bright and unclouded character.

It may surprise some of my readers to be informed, that so far from this being the case, the fruits of these Anglican Sisterhoods are already deplorable. The amount of corruption and abuse existing within them baffles description, and proves but too truly that “they who sow to the wind shall reap the whirlwind.”

I have before me a book entitled “Sisterhoods in the

Church of England,"\* (Second edit., 1864), written by Miss Margaret Goodman, a lady of irreproachable character, of High Church principles, and who was, and still is, a strong advocate for these and similar institutions. Miss Goodman's object is not to condemn these establishments, but by pointing out the abuses which have already occurred, to lead to their improvement and ultimate efficiency, by having them placed under, what she considers, competent ecclesiastical authority. In doing this, the admissions made, and the facts narrated, are of the most painful and harrowing nature.

1. It is impossible to read this volume without seeing that there is a systematic disregard of parental authority. It is obvious that many young persons are in these establishments contrary to the wishes of their parents, and that they are taught to consider that the authority under which they have placed themselves, is more important and more sacred, than that of the most tender parent. Instances are also given in which anxious and affectionate parents have been denied an interview with their children.

Thus one of the most sacred commandments of Almighty God is set aside, and a human device of a very questionable nature is substituted for it.

2. The authority assumed by the "Ladies Superior" in these Sisterhoods is not only of the most arrogant and offensive nature, but has *in many instances* been productive of the most distressing consequences.

In connection with a Sisterhood in Osnaburg Street, Regent's Park, the following case is given:—

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\* This book is strongly recommended by the press; and more particularly by the "Athenæum," "Press," "Spectator," "Westminster Review," "Economist," "Examiner," "English Churchman," &c.

“The Sister of whom I am now writing, took a cold, which, being neglected, proved fatal, from being constantly obliged to remain many hours with damp feet. She had asked for new boots some months previously, but her request had been overlooked, I suppose; while to add to her necessity, she was portress of the house in Osnaburg Street, and in taking her messages to the Superior she had to cross an exposed courtyard during a wet and cold season.

“If the poor Sister’s death had been occasioned by a cold caught while in the execution of some act of mercy, we might not so much have deplored it, but it seems extremely sad that a valuable life should have been sacrificed to an absurd rule.”

What the “absurd rule” is, we are left to guess. It seems to be that these injured ladies may not presume to ask for a new pair of boots or shoes, until the Lady Superior condescends to order them!

Let me offer another example, of a somewhat different kind, occurring within the same establishment, and showing the effect of the superstitious practices there encouraged:—

“A Sister who was very much esteemed for her saintliness, used severe abstinence during a whole Lent, and thus at the beginning of Passion Week was greatly reduced; on Holy Thursday she took some porridge at noon, and from that time did not permit anything to pass her lips—not even a drop of water—until Easter Sunday; it was then too late, and she died during Easter-tide of gastric fever.”

The abstinence and self-denial thus encouraged or imposed on these unhappy young persons, form a striking contrast to the luxurious living and costly apparel indulged in by the Ladies Superior.\* In *their* case we are told that the anxiety of *ruling* is in itself sufficient self-denial, and that no further abstinence is necessary.

3. Another painful feature of these establishments is the

\* See Appendix A.

unprincipled grasping at the property of the dying inmates. The following case illustrates this :—

“The father of H. was a Scotch baronet, and when he died the property went to his eldest son ; but Lady ——, the mother of H., was an heiress, and a considerable part of her own large property was settled on herself for life, to be divided equally afterwards among her daughters and younger sons. When H. was dying at Bradford (one of Miss Sellon’s establishments), her mother and sister were sent for ; but they were allowed to stay only two days, of which one was Sunday. On the Monday, H. made a will, leaving her share of her mother’s property absolutely to Miss Sellon, or to the Sisterhood, which is much the same thing. The mother expressed a wish that her daughter should do otherwise, but in vain.”

Such are a few of the baneful effects which this unnatural and unscriptural system has produced within the first twenty years of its revival in England ! Can we wonder that insanity prevails within the dark and dreary walls of these establishments, and that many of the oppressed and weary inmates would gladly make their escape ?

The description given by Miss Goodman of Miss Sellon’s establishment at Devonport, is peculiarly painful, and the details should be read and carefully considered by all who feel an interest in this subject.

III. But it is affirmed that all these establishments are not equally objectionable, and that there is one called St. Peter’s Home, in Brompton Square, which is more moderately conducted, and better entitled to public confidence. It is to the Sisters connected with that establishment that it is now proposed to entrust the nursing of certain wards in St. George’s Hospital.

I strongly object to such an arrangement. It is making a



new and dangerous experiment, and the consequences may be painful to all parties. If these persons are admitted on trial, we cannot doubt that they will be extremely cautious during the period of probation, and we shall find it very difficult to prove anything against them, especially as they are said to be under the patronage of one who is a warm friend to our Hospital—a gentleman whose philanthropy we all admire, and whose princely liberality we shall do well to imitate.

I have myself no confidence in the *moderation* of St. Peter's Home. I live within half-a-mile of it, and any reports that have reached me, have conveyed a very opposite impression. But supposing that I am mistaken, and that St. Peter's Home is at present conducted in a quiet and moderate manner, what guarantee have we that it will continue to be so? The other "Sisterhoods" have all commenced in this way, and have gradually become what they now are. It has certainly been so in Miss Sellon's establishments. Miss Goodman says :—

"Miss Sellon began well : there is no doubt but that the influence of the House at Devonport was, at one time, most beneficial to the district. . . . The change was gradual, almost imperceptible ; month by month, year by year, its freshness, beauty, and grace, wore away, and a miserable, ghastly, lifeless skeleton remained, whose grasp was intolerable bondage."

With such an example before us, who can predict what may be the future of St. Peter's Home?

Nay more ; Miss Sellon gravely says that she would have given up her establishment altogether, had it not been that the Bishop of Exeter, on ceasing to visit the Sisterhood, pronounced upon her his blessing ; and it is the blessing of

that venerable prelate which constrains her to go on with these proceedings. If such be the effect of an episcopal benediction, who can tell how disastrous the consequences may be, if a similar blessing should be pronounced on the Lady Superior of St. Peter's Home !

My Lords and Gentlemen, the parochial clergy are deeply interested in this question. The influence of these Sisterhoods is not exerted in favour of the ordinary parochial ministry. This is felt even by some of the very High-Church clergy, who are withdrawing from these societies with disappointment and disgust.\* For myself, I can truly affirm that I have never, even amongst restricted Baptists and Primitive Methodists, met with a spirit so narrow and sectarian as amongst the members and supporters of these establishments.

A few years ago, I obtained admission into one of these Homes for a poor young woman who was living in my parish, and had been led into vicious habits. She was kindly treated, and derived considerable benefit from the instruction which she received, but she returned home under the most solemn exhortations (if not promises) to withdraw herself from my ministry, and to attend a highly ritualistic church in this neighbourhood.

More recently a Home was opened within my parochial district by a lady of very High Church principles, who wore the dress of a nun, and announced her intention of carrying on a certain work amongst the poor. I offered to call upon her as a new parishioner, and assured her that although I might not be able to sympathize with her views, she would find me a quiet neighbour. My visit was at once and

\* See Appendix B.



abruptly declined, and I found that the whole efforts of that lady and her party were to influence the labouring classes against the parochial ministry. In this they were happily unsuccessful, and they have since disappeared.

I mention these cases merely to show that the question is one in which the Parochial Clergy are not unconcerned. In the course of each year many of our poor parishioners pass through the wards of St. George's Hospital, and great indeed are the benefits which they there receive. It will, however, become rather a serious thing for us, if they return home prejudiced by these "Sisterhood" Nurses against their own church and minister, and solemnly charged to show their gratitude to the Hospital, by attending places of worship more congenial to the views of those persons.

I venture, then, earnestly to raise my voice against the proposed innovation.\* It is an arrangement hitherto unknown in the history of our Hospital.† The announcement of it has created much alarm, and is influencing many friends against us. The result can only be to stir up strife and

\* Whilst this discussion has been going on at St. George's Hospital, the following suggestive paragraph appeared in the *Times* newspaper (23rd March, 1866), under the head of "Irish News:"—"The late Mr. J. Grattan, 13 years ago left a sum of £4,500. to the Queen's County Infirmary, which sum has not since been applied. Mrs. Grattan Bellew, owner of the Grattan estates in Queen's County, now offers to pay up the money, with interest, arrears, &c., and to add £1,000. of her own for the erection of a Hospital or Ward for Convalescents or Incurables, upon condition that the Hospital should be placed under the care of the *Sisters of Charity*, with every safeguard against interfering with the religion of the patients, and with free access to the clergy of all persuasions. The governors of the infirmary, 31 Protestants and 3 Catholics, met to consider this proposal, and it was negatived without a division."

Our Irish neighbours have had more experience of "Sisterhoods" than ourselves, and I trust that their example will not be lost upon us.

† See Appendix C.

division, and to hinder that great and good work in which we have so long been engaged.

I learn that a Special Court will be held on April 20th, for the purpose of deciding this important question, and I earnestly trust that the result may be all that the best friends of the Hospital can desire.

The subject of nursing is of great importance, and calls for the serious consideration of all who would promote the best interests of our Hospitals. A lady, whose truly heroic efforts for the relief of our suffering soldiers during the late war with Russia has endeared her to us all, has written with much ability, on this subject. She does not suggest a change from Nurses to Sisterhoods, but recommends that opportunity should be afforded to a certain number of respectable women, to be trained and educated at our Hospitals. This seems to be a valuable suggestion, but I forbear to enter on this part of this subject. It is too important to be hastily discussed, and demands our most attentive consideration.

It is said that there are 25,000\* women in this country who devote themselves to nursing as a means of subsistence. If so, the supply seems to be adequate, and the want simply lies in the absence of due preparation for their duties.

We may hope then to find a remedy, without adopting a system which is new to this favoured country, offensive to English feeling, and contrary to sound Protestant principles and practice.

I have the honour to be,  
My Lords and Gentlemen,  
Your old, obliged, and faithful Servant,

WILLIAM NIVEN.

5, Walton Place, Chelsea.  
3rd April, 1866.

\* See Appendix D.

[*Turn over.*]

## APPENDIX.

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### A.

Miss Goodman writes—"Most elaborate was the care bestowed in preparing the suite of rooms in which Miss Sellon and Dr. Pusey lived. I may mention that some hundreds of pounds were spent in making ready their apartments. I do not mean in furniture only, but in carrying hot-water pipes into every room and passage, in addition to the open grates. A long spiral flight of stone steps was covered with wood, on which was nailed rich carpeting; and whenever the Lady Superior ascended or descended, these pieces of carpeted wood were fitted on to each step, and taken up again when she had ceased to walk upon them."

### B.

Miss Goodman says—"Miss Sellon did not generally get on well with the Clergy, but usually in her little skirmishes she came off victorious." The following amusing illustration is added :—A confidential Sister was deputed by Miss Sellon to deliver the following *sisterly* message to a Reverend Director of one of these Sisterhoods :—"The Lady Superior desires me to tell you, that you are the most arrogant of priests." "Then tell her, from me, that she is a *bully*," was the clerical reply!

## C.

If I rightly understand the Report of the Committee, they go so far as to recommend that in case of neglect or misconduct on the part of these "Sisters," they shall not be liable to be dismissed by the Matron, or by the Weekly Board, but only by the Lady Superior of St. Peter's Home.

Can this be seriously intended? If so, the discipline of the Hospital is at an end; and there is no reason why, at some future time, we may not discover that the care of these wards has been entrusted to a Miss Constance Kent, or to the notorious "Female Jesuit," and be unable to help ourselves, unless the Lady Superior condescends to deliver us!

## D.

Referring to the Census of 1851, Miss Nightingale says—"25,466 women were returned as Nurses by profession, 39,139 as Nurses in domestic service, and 2,822 Midwives."

